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Look at That Little Macho: Surveillance And Hegemonic Masculinity in Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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INTRODUCTION

In an interview with *Slate* magazine's Meghan O'Rourke, Junot Díaz revealed the motivations behind his Pulitzer prize-winning, debut novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). Díaz explains: "I wanted to screw with traditional Dominican masculinity."[1] In order to explore Dominican manhood, from the outset, the narrative juxtaposes the innate dichotomy between cultural conceptions of masculinity and daily lived experiences. Particularly important, I contend, are titular character Oscar de Léon,[2] an overweight, lovesick nerd on the quest for love, and his maternal grandfather Abelard Luis Cabral, "Un hombre muy serio, muy educado y muy bien plantado,"[3] both of whom fall short of the prescriptive Dominican masculinity the novel establishes (Díaz 211). In tracing the various love-related occurrences in Oscar's life, the tale also considers the past, exploring his maternal family history, thereby demonstrating the resilient, trans-historic nature of Dominican masculinity. Díaz's stated purpose, and the novel's disruption of Dominican masculinity, lies in its exploration of characters whose lives demonstrably reveal the inaccessibility of exemplary masculine qualities; in other words, it explores individuals – my focus being Abelard and Oscar – who push against characters that embody the illusory conceptualization of Dominican manhood. To do so, Díaz locates Abelard's story during the dictatorial reign of former Dominican Republic leader, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina (1930 – 1961),[4] a figure who personifies Dominican

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[1] In citing Díaz's interview, like Melissa M. Gonzalez, I don't position Díaz as the interpretive authority on his text, rather I concur with Gonzalez in that his interviews "participate in a strain of academic discourse about power and subjection in relation to gender, race, and sexuality" (279).

[2] The name "Oscar Wao" is a mispronunciation of nickname "Oscar Wilde" by some of Yunior's friends when Yunior referred to Oscar as Wilde (180).

[3] In the same 2008 *Slate* interview, when asked about isolating non-Spanish speaking readers with the heavy use of Spanglish in the novel, Díaz responded: "I've almost never read an adult book where I didn't have to pick up a dictionary. I guess I participate more in my readings and expect the same out of my readership. I want people to research, to ask each other, to question." In an attempt to follow in his footsteps, I limit my translations to only those necessary for my line of argumentation.

[4] Yunior notes that "Trujillo…came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life" – this is historically correct (2). Moreover, Yunior provides additional facts about Trujillo's history including that he changed landmarks and city names to honor himself,

masculinity. On Trujillo's importance to Dominican culture and history, in the aforementioned interview Díaz expounds: "He was so fundamentally Dominican, and for a Dominican writer writing about masculinity, about dictatorship, power, he's indispensable." Abelard's varied responses to the power of the "fundamentally Dominican" Trujillo illuminates the mental and physical strain individuals can undergo when navigating cultural norms. Likewise, Oscar's own experience with stereotypically masculine men mirrors his grandfather's encounter with the dictator. A tension thus develops between the individuals who diverge from normative notions of masculinity and those who appear to embody its concepts, effectively resulting in the novel's "screwing" of traditional Dominican masculinity.

My reading primarily focuses on the nature and function of the masculinity Díaz locates in the Dominican and Dominican-American cultural contexts he presents.[5] The Dominican masculinity explored in the novel taps into patterns addressed by scholars who study masculinity more broadly. One such sociologist, R.W. Connell, provides a helpful term for discussing the production of masculinity in society: hegemonic masculinity. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees...the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77). In other words, it is the currently accepted, culturally dominant ideals surrounding masculinity, with the caveat that hegemonic masculinity maintains a vexed relationship with women and femininity.[6] Few can obtain the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, if anyone at all. *Dominican*

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such as the renaming of Santo Domingo to "Ciudad Trujillo." Among other things, Trujillo is also responsible for the massacre of around 20,000 Haitians (History.com)

[5] While I examine masculinity, Díaz's text does engage with how the Dominican female is conceptualized primarily via his mother and sister. However, the novel focuses on men and masculinity and my research follows suit. Gonzalez engages with the notion of femininity in the novel; see Works Cited.

[6] For example, one might think of "strong" or "brave" when thinking about qualities of masculinity. These are culturally inculcated ideals.

hegemonic masculinity then, specifically refers to the touted form of ideal behavior for Dominican and Dominican-American men in a given time and place. Within *Wao*, the narrator and other characters express expectations for a "typical Dominican" or "Normal Dominican," and from these suggestions I ascertain how Díaz's text defines and subsequently undermines Dominican hegemonic masculinity through exploring characters that both adhere to and depart from this ideal. Supplementing the narrative assertions, I explore how scholars define and study the Latino masculinity or *machismo* which encompasses Dominican hegemonic masculinity.[7] While the characters take a particularly strong stance concerning their understandings of manhood, Díaz acknowledges that his work, by nature of being only one text by one man, cannot hope to speak for the entire essence of the Dominican Republic or its understandings of masculinity. Even so, the fictional experiences of Abelard and Oscar encourage conversations about the damning cultural systems to which they, and perhaps we, subscribe. Thus, in my analysis of this particular, imagined story, I explore the narrative's assertions about the freedom of the individual to operate within or escape the grasp of the cultural system and its representative figures who push a singular form of masculinity.

In the quest for understanding how the novel deploys and perpetuates expectations for Dominican hegemonic masculinity, I reference Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon to demonstrate how the antagonistic relationship between Abelard, Oscar, and these representative figures develops in the novel. Foucault describes an imagined prison structure whose architectural design allows for just one guard to manage an entire prison.[8] Compositionally, it features a circular

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[7] Consequently, my argument uses Dominican hegemonic masculinity, Latino masculinity and *machismo* interchangeably to reference how the societies in which Abelard and Oscar live define the appropriate performance of masculinity as well as to discuss theoretical studies regarding these concepts.

[8] While the goal is for one guard to watch the whole prison, Foucault admits that "it does not matter who exercises power" (202). That "Any individual…can operate the machine" (202). In other words,

room, and at the center, a guard tower fitted with wide windows that allow the guard visual access to the larger room (containing the cells and prisoners) from any side of the tower. The prison room contains individual cells that each have two windows: one at the back of the cell facing outside, and the other opening up into the room, towards the central tower. Above all, the prisoners can see the guard and the guard tower, but they retain no level of certainty regarding where the gaze of the watchman lies at any particular time. The prison's design prioritizes visible (erect guard tower) yet unverifiable power (unpredictable gaze) and promotes internalization and self-surveillance. In effect, this ensures the "automatic functioning of power" wherein the guard's surveillance is "permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" and "the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (Foucault 201). To put it differently, like the driver on the highway who self-polices by adjusting his or her speed because he or she internalizes that the *possibility* exists that a cop waits up the road, so too the prisoner self-surveils and adjusts his or her behavior due to the *threat* of surveillance from the guard.

In the same way, I argue, Abelard and Oscar maintain an awareness of their behavior due to a growing sense of their own visibility. Particularly, characters around them repeatedly call their respective versions of masculinity into question or infringe on their ability to perform facets of *machismo*. For Abelard, Trujillo's regime quite literally utilizes spies and "Secret Police" to both maintain and inculcate power within Dominican locals in ways that closely resemble panoptic structural elements. The dictator's status as the ultimate "Dominican" or "fundamentally Dominican" male – to borrow Díaz's phrasing, coupled with his constant surveillance of the inhabitants of the Dominican Republic, affect Abelard's performance of what comes to be understood in the novel as Dominican masculinity. In Oscar's life, Yunior, his sister Lola, and others

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Foucault allows for anyone to participate in the surveillance of the subject because surveillance by anyone, with any motivation, can produce the intended effect.

specifically surveil and comment on Oscar's masculinity. Although there are moments where people openly scrutinize Abelard's masculinity, I argue that surveillance more so *affects* Abelard's masculinity, while by the time Oscar comes onto the scene, there is a direct surveillance *of* Oscar's masculinity. I focus on the ever-present social surveillance that leads to the internalization and self-surveillance regarding appropriate masculine behavior, particularly in Abelard and Oscar. I thus posit that Díaz's novel explores culturally dominant forms of Dominican masculinity in order to suggest a potential way forward for both society and the individual. Díaz's text, in essence, considers how his atypical bearers of masculinity resist the system, reveal its extent, and call for its reevaluation.

Typically, scholars apply Foucauldian panoptic theories to literary texts that explore life in highly surveilled societies as in Orwell's *1984* or Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.[9] However, I locate panopticism in 20th-century Dominican Republic and New Jersey, where much of the story takes place. Although atypical, when considered against previous applications of Foucault's theories, I argue that panopticism characterizes the surveillance of Dominican masculinity. In Abelard's story, the panoptic nature of Trujillo's regime appears more conspicuously than in Oscar's life. Díaz stresses the importance of family history within the novel through careful similarities in the lives of generations of the Cabral family. However, by and large, scholars ignore Abelard's role and influence in the story as it relates to masculinity, choosing instead to focus on Oscar. To demonstrate, Katherine Weese discusses the construction of Dominican masculinity in the novel in relation to the unnatural narrative voice; however, Weese focuses on the masculinity of Yunior and Oscar. Indeed, she explores Yunior's masculinity in conversation with Trujillo's, but makes only passing mention of Abelard, his masculinity, or its connection to Trujillo. My argument then, utilizes prevailing approaches in literary study by exploring surveillance and panopticism, but adds to critical

[9] Pamela Cooper discusses surveillance in the film adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Likewise, Jean-Jacques Courtine and Laura Willett discuss the panopticon in relation to *1984;* see Works Cited for both.

conversation by applying Foucault's theory to *Wao* specifically, while shifting focus to Abelard, his masculinity, and the generational implications.

Scholars invested in analyzing Latino masculinity and masculinity more broadly, highlight important aspects of its nature and function. Todd Reeser's work helps us understand masculinity as "an explicit and visible object of analysis" (4). Reeser explains that more often than not, masculinity becomes most visible "because of its perceived absence" (1). For example, on the one hand, as Oscar's life and personality unfold before readers, the chasm between Oscar's behavior and the expectations of the characters around him (including reader expectations) emphasize Oscar's woeful departure from societal norms. On the other hand, Reeser mentions, "The excess of masculinity...makes us aware of it" (1). And so, characters like Trujillo and Yunior, among others, through their hyper-masculinity, also highlight the presence masculinity as something we are able to recognize and study.[10]

Given this dual means of stressing masculinity, it is not surprising that scholars tend to engage with masculinity in both *Wao* and Díaz's other works. Critic John Riofrio, investigates masculinity in Díaz's earliest work, a short story collection, *Drown* (1996), where Yunior makes his first appearance. Riofrio draws on scholarship from Dominican psychologist Antonio de Moya, where de Moya writes:

> From early childhood, males are led to become self-conscious about those verbal and non-verbal behaviours which could lead others to suspect that they are not "true" or "real" men. This self-consciousness, which may become quasi-paranoid by adolescence for

[10] Judith Butler makes a similar case when discussing gender and drag. Butler argues that "While we are aware of the dissonance between performance [of drag] and the anatomical body, the performance serves to *denaturalize* our views of gender" (Alsop et al. 104). In other words, like absence and excess highlight masculinity, in drag, the displayed dichotomy between presentation and the sex of the body foreground the constructed nature of gender – making it an easier object of study. See her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) for more information.

> nonconforming males, is the product of an ongoing process of stringent, totalitarian "gender work", orienting towards the construction of a hegemonic male. (qtd. in Riofrio 98)

Riofrio notes the "concrete ways in which masculinity depends on a kind of self-policing among its members" and that the individual's "Freedom of expression, whether through body language or verbal and emotional communication, is scrutinized to a degree that transforms the adolescent male into a well-trained subject 'unconsciously' aware of the 'natural' rules of masculinity" (26). Weese concurs, and notes of Oscar: "He became suicidal, internalizing his companions' definitions of masculinity as virility and questioning his own self-worth when he fails to measure up" (91). Here, Weese highlights the influence of those surrounding Oscar and their ability to encourage in him the kind of hegemonic masculinity - Dominican - with which he finds himself fundamentally at odds. Importantly, both Riofrio and Weese use language - "self-policing," "well-trained subject," "unconsciously aware," and "internalizing" - that suggests a parallel between the panopticon, its function, and the way society, specifically Latino and Dominican society, take on dynamics of the prison in order to push a particular kind of masculine behavior.

M. Cristina Alcalde and others note specific aspects of *machismo* that illuminate the pressures the environment pushes Abelard and Oscar to face. Although her work does not reference Díaz or *Wao* specifically, her scholarship on *machismo* reveals features of it that appear throughout the story. She draws attention to the significance of "familism" to Latino males, explaining that it "refers to the centrality of and loyalty to the family and to the prioritizing of family unity and needs over individual members's interests and needs" (540). In fact, Abelard's greatest struggle with masculinity deals with loyalty to his family. Moreover, Alcalde notes negative aspects of familism; there can be familial and social tensions "for sons who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity." We recall Oscar's battle with his appearance and preferences that positions him almost entirely at odds with conceptualizations of Dominican masculinity within the novel (540). Marysol W. Asencio

additionally notes the importance of virility to Latino males, indicating how society also associates *machismo* with various forms of violence including "physical and verbal aggression," that in turn leads to a "sense of invulnerability, courage, and honor," which can take a positive spin through an "obligation to protect and provide for [family]," just as Alcalde mentions.[11] Furthermore, *machismo* delineates a difference from women, associating men with a "stronger sexual drive than females" which allows that men "may be freed from social constraints in order to satisfy this drive;" thus, "expressions of machismo are partially dependent on the categorization and treatment of females," (Asencio 109, 110). This dynamic thus informs how Trujillo's performance of *machismo,* which centers on domination and sleeping with women, stands at odds with Abelard's need to protect his female family members and assert the boundaries of his own sphere of influence. Indeed, male figures in Oscar's life encourage domination of women and sexual rapacity in order to achieve the coveted title of Dominican male. However, as Abelard and Oscar resist both *machismo* and the characters who represent it, readers become aware of the difficulty in pushing against culturally developed gendered systems. Despite Abelard's major role in my argument, critical conversation about *Wao* centers around the masculinity of Yunior, Oscar and Trujillo. By incorporating Abelard, I provide a more complete picture of the generational effects of Dominican hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, departing from prevailing readings, I analyze the production and proliferation of *machismo* through the lens of the Foucauldian panopticon, examining how the Dominican and Dominican-American cultures take on its dynamics.

DOMINICAN HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN *WAO*

Early on, *Wao* reifies the theoretical notions of Latino masculinity - male domination, female subordination, sexual rapacity, and violence - by representing them through the language and actions

[11] Asencio also notes "A male must control and protect 'his' females (wife, daughter, girlfriend) from other predatory males while he attempts to seduce other females" (109).

of characters. Through Yunior, the novel comments extensively on the ideal Dominican male, practically redefining the term "Dominican" from a national to a gendered term as it relates to the men it describes. From the first sentence of the first chapter of his narration, Yunior's language communicates the kind of Dominican that the characters in the novel expect to see. He observes:

> Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock. And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him). (11)

Here, Yunior states explicitly that "having luck with females" and having "a million hots" are part of what makes someone a *Dominican* male; he adds emphasis by repeating the term twice. In fact, Yunior goes as far as suggesting that bad luck with women makes one not only "un-Dominican" but "*very*" much so. As Asencio notes, the Latino male's relationship to women is key in determining how closely he aligns with normative standards, as demonstrated here. Yunior continues establishing the novel's take on hegemonic Dominican masculinity by describing Oscar's estrangement from *machismo* saying:

> Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we're talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands. (24)

Again, Yunior places emphasis on the relationship between being Dominican and sexually rapacious, evidenced by the need to be "pulling in the bitches with both hands." Once more, Yunior repeats the term Dominican in order to demonstrate that *because* we are discussing a Dominican kid, from a Dominican family, he needs to be particularly adept at sleeping with multiple women. Moreover, in keeping with theoretical understandings of *machismo*, his casual use of the term "bitches"

communicates the secondary status of women within the culture. What's more, Oscar's uncle Rudolfo further underscores female marginality when he suggests Oscar, "grab a muchacha, y metéselo" that he "Start with a fea. Coje that fea y metéselo!" (24). Rudolfo's comments translate to "grab a girl and stick it in her. Start with an ugly girl, take that girl and stick it in her!" Rudolfo's advice not only removes female agency from the sexual interaction, but uses words like "grab" and "stick it" that communicate a level of violence and female subordination that falls in line with Asencio's work on *machismo*. Thus, from the story's beginning, readers are given a picture of Dominican hegemonic masculinity that prioritizes virility and violence.

DOMINICAN HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND TRUJILLO

When Trujillo appears later in the novel, the narrator again invokes the sexually-driven connotation of the word "Dominican" previously established. Yunior writes: "If you think the average Dominican guy's bad, Trujillo was five thousand times worse" (217). Abelard too notes the dangers of Trujillo's hyper-masculinity. He soon realizes that his daughter, Jacqueline, "ha[s] caught a serious case of the hips-ass-chest, a condition which during the mid-forties spelled trouble with a capital T to the R to the U to the J to the illo" (Díaz 216). Here, Yunior draws on the ideas surrounding Dominican males, and conveys the notion that Abelard's daughter becomes fair game for Trujillo's sexual exploitation. Moreover, Yunior writes, "Trujillo might have been a Dictator, but he was a Dominican Dictator, which is another way of saying he was the Number-One Bellaco in the Country" (Díaz 216-217). By describing him as not just a Dictator but a "*Dominican* Dictator", Yunior invokes the redefinition of "Dominican" lurking throughout the novel. Trujillo strives to "metéselo" and exert his Dominican masculinity through his sexual prowess, whereas Abelard demonstrates his masculinity through his "obligation to protect and provide for [his] family" (Asencio 109). Importantly, Yunior notes of Trujillo that, "Dude had hundreds of spies whose entire job was to scour the provinces for his next piece of ass" (217). Trujillo thus deploys panoptic

mechanisms in order to reinforce his Dominican masculinity, especially in relation to sexuality. The threat of surveillance, in this case, also functions in the potential for an assault on one's female family members. Trujillo's behavior, then, places his performance of masculinity at odds with Abelard who desires to protect his daughter. By embodying aspects of *machismo* so entirely, the novel figures Trujillo as its foremost representative.

PANOPTICISM: REAL AND IMAGINED

Both in fiction and history, the reign of Trujillo parallels the panopticon and its internalizing and self-surveilling effects on those within it. Germán E. Ornes, Dominican publisher and journalist during the Era of Trujillo,[12] writes: "Knowing Trujillo's willingness to resort to ruthlessness with the weapons of terror at his disposal, Dominicans have learned never to discuss politics in public places, or in the presence of children, servants or strangers" (101). In other words, Dominicans adjusted their behavior due to potential ramifications from the regime. Ornes provides a helpful illustration:

> When questioned about the Generalissimo himself, the people's attitude changes. With alacrity they will give an enthusiastic standard answer: each one will profess deep love for the Benefactor. Even the few who in the privacy of their homes dare to indulge in the most bitter criticism of the regime will act in public places as its most enthusiastic supporters. (101)

Yunior describes this same dynamic in Abelard's life where "As a general practice [he] tried his best not to think about El Jefe at all, followed a sort of the Tao of Dictator Avoidance, which was ironic considering that Abelard was unmatched in maintaining the outward appearance of the enthusiastic Trujillista" (215). Both Ornes and Yunior highlight the intentional adjustment of behavior that individuals within the Trujillistic panopticon undergo, with both positing "enthusiastic" as the go-to response.

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[12] Also called the "Trujillato."

Indeed, Julie A. Sellers, in his book *Bachata and Dominican Identity,* explicitly draws this connection between Trujillo's reign in documented history and its panoptic elements as a means of explaining the dictator's impact on cultural identity.[13] He writes, "Trujillo relied on a group of organized thugs…and an elaborate network of spies, the *Servicio de Inteligencia Militar* (Military Intelligence Service – SIM) to report, threaten, and punish" (45). Within the novel as well, the nature of Trujillo's government lends itself to panoptic readings due to his far-reaching, seemingly ever-present and all-seeing power. In his descriptions of the fictitious version of Trujillo, Díaz echoes Sellers, portraying the dictator as omnipresent and ever-vigilant through his "Secret Police" who function as his surveillance team. Describing Trujillo in the novel he writes, "His Eye was everywhere; he had a Secret Police…that kept watch on everyone...you could say a bad thing about El Jefe at eight-forty in the morning and before the clock struck ten you'd be in the Cuarenta having a cattleprod shoved up your ass" (Díaz 225).[14] The threat of surveillance is key to the theory of the panopticon. Trujillo's unverifiable power in the novel contributes to the panoptic nature of his reign. By describing his "Eye" as "everywhere" which "kept watch on everyone," Díaz parallels the language of Foucault and Sellers who draws this connection between Trujillo and the panopticon while harkening back to the realities described by Ornes.[15]

Sellers too notes Trujillo's ability to "induce...a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" through his panoptic governmental and social

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[13] Monica Hanna argues the correlation between the fragmented novel structure and the fragmented identities of the characters. Hanna makes an interesting argument for how "Trujillo becomes identified with the Dominican nation" (502). She too notes the novel's insistence regarding Trujillo's importance to Dominican culture.

[14] La Cuarenta or "the forty" refers to a prison in Santa Domingo. Therein, actors in the Trujillo regime tortured and killed Dominicans.

[15] The "Eye" references the Eye of Sauron from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy. It was a symbol used by the Dark Lord, a name Yunior uses for Trujillo. The Eye is a metaphor for Sauron's overwhelming presence. This understanding of the Eye underscores Trujillo's position as one who always watches.

structures (Foucault 201). He notes, "Together, the real and imagined threats produced a pervasive sense of terror reflective of [the] proposed model for the ideal prison, the Panopticon" (Sellers 45).[16] Likewise, in *Wao*, the narrator Yunior informs readers that "it would be hard to exaggerate the power Trujillo exerted over the Dominican people and the shadow of fear he cast throughout the region" (Díaz 224). Yunior frames Trujillo's power as an entity that pervades society in the Dominican Republic, unable to be captured or properly traced, writing, "but when it came to more abstract menaces like, say, Trujillo" (219). This "abstract" notion of Trujillo's power creates as Foucault's describes it, "a power situation of which [the inmates] are themselves the bearers" (Foucault 201). In other words, for the panopticon to work, prisoners must internalize the threat so much so that they in turn police and monitor themselves. In Trujillo's regime as described in *Wao*, the panoptic nature of his government structure affects Abelard's performance of *machismo*.

I argue that Trujillo's impact on Abelard's masculinity results first, from the panoptic structure of his regime and second, Yunior's positioning of the dictator as one who embodies (if not creates) the ideals surrounding Dominican masculinity. As Yunior, Rudolfo, and Latino masculinity theorists previously articulate, alignment with *machismo* depends on virility. Yunior mentions Trujillo's "notorious rapacity" and invokes his redefinition of "Dominican" saying, "Ask any of your elders and they will tell you: Trujillo might have been a Dictator, but he was a Dominican Dictator" (Díaz 216). In other words, Trujillo's position as a Dominican, necessitates hyper-sexuality or the procurement of "a million hots on his jock" as we learned early in the novel. Yunior further clarifies his statement, adding:

> ...which is another way of saying he was the Number-One Bellaco in the Country. Believed that all the toto in the DR was, literally, his. It's a well-documented fact that in Trujillo's DR

[16] Yunior too draws explicit connections between the Dominican Republic and prisons: "This was a country, a society, that had been designed to be virtually escape-proof. Alcatraz of the Antilles" (80). Alcatraz is an abandoned prison off the coast of California.

> if you were of a certain class and you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe, within the week she'd be mamando his ripio like an old pro and *there would be nothing you could do about it*...so insatiable [were] Trujillo's appetites. (217)[17]

This passage demonstrates the understanding of Trujillo as figure who chooses to perform his masculinity through being the primary "Bellaco" or "horny male," believing all the "toto" (Dominican slang for female genitalia) belonged to him. Yunior expounds in the footnotes, Trujillo was known for "fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women" (2). As a result, Trujillo eventually makes inquiries about Abelard's attractive, traffic-stopping daughter. For Abelard, this poses an issue; Trujillo's version of masculinity infringes on his own ability to protect his family, and as a result, he decides to pull "a Rapunzel on her ass" and confines her to the home (217). When Trujillo broaches the subject with Abelard regarding his daughter's noticeable absence, the text demonstrates the tension between how both choose to enact *machismo.*

> I have seen you here often, Doctor, but lately without your wife. Have you divorced her?
>
> I am still married, Your Enormity. To Socorro Hernández Batista.
>
> That is good to hear, El Jefe said, I was afraid that you might have turned into *un maricón.*
>
> Then he turned to the lambesacos and laughed...I've heard that you have daughters, Dr. Cabral, una que es muy bella y elegante, no? (222)[18]

Interestingly, Trujillo manages to attack Abelard's masculinity in more ways than one. Here, it is helpful to return to Connell and examine more closely her understanding of hegemonic masculinity. Important to note, a key portion of that definition acknowledges both the "dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77). However, Connell also later argues that

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[17] The sexually explicit phrase "mamando his ripio" translates to "sucking his penis."
[18] "Muy bella y elegante" translates to "very beautiful and elegant."

"Within that overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men" (78). One such relation is the "dominance of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men" (78). Despite the fact that Abelard never identifies as homosexual, Trujillo's comment towards Abelard about almost being "un maricon,"[19] and then Trujillo's subsequent turning and laughing with his counterparts at the idea, communicate the subordination Connell identifies as an "important case in contemporary European/American society" (78). Because sexual rapacity and the male interaction with females functions as the primary identifier of a "successful" Dominican male, homosexuality - and the preference for male-male rather than male-female relations - becomes positioned as an identity wholly at odds with *machismo*. With this context in mind, Trujillo's comments towards Abelard thus function as one method for undermining Abelard's masculinity. By laughing with those around him at Abelard's expense, Trujillo establishes himself as the unchallenged wielder of power within that interaction. To put it differently, by introducing the idea of homosexuality, Trujillo positions Abelard as an inferior Dominican male in the face of his own notorious sexual track record with women. To add insult to injury, Trujillo follows by inquiring about Abelard's wife and daughter - a subtle, yet direct assault on Abelard's masculinity. Abelard desires to safeguard his family and resist Trujillo, but "Hiding your doe-eyed, large-breasted daughter from Trujillo...was anything but easy" (Díaz 217). In asking about Abelard's "muy bella y elegante" children, Trujillo communicates his desire to "metéselo" and exert his Dominican masculinity through his sexual prowess, whereas Abelard attempts to fulfill the "obligation to protect and provide for [the] family" (Asencio 109). Ultimately, Abelard never brings

[19] "Un maricon" means "faggot," a derogatory term in both Spanish and English for homosexual men. It can be used in regards to heterosexual men as an insult or comment on their apparent alignment with femininity.

his daughters around Trujillo, and the threat of punishment for resisting Trujillo's unspoken, but well-known rule within panoptic Dominican Republic impacts the surgeon in physical ways.[20]

ABELARD, TRUJILLO, AND *MACHISMO*

I argue that social surveillance affects Abelard's masculinity; this occurs due to: 1. Trujillo's aforementioned encroachment on Abelard's ability to demonstrate *machismo* and 2. Abelard's awareness that actors in Trujillo's regime can observe him at any time. This threat of surveillance inculcates fear and produces visible effects on Abelard's standing with respect to the ideals of *machismo*. Shortly after the exchange between the two where Trujillo asks about Abelard's wife and children, the reality of living within a regime as dictatorial as the Trujillato begins to take a toll on him. The vigilance of the Dominican community further extends El Jefe's influence, and Abelard's sense of constant visibility is as a direct result of this widespread belief:

> ...[At] any one time between forty-two and eighty-seven percent of the Dominican population was on the Secret Police's payroll. Your own fucking neighbors could acabar con you just because you had something they coveted...Mad folks went out in that manner, betrayed by those they considered their panas, by members of their own families, by slips of the tongue...many people actually believed that Trujillo had supernatural powers! It was whispered that he did not sleep, did not sweat, that he could see, smell, feel events hundreds of miles away. (225-226)

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[20] Yunior writes, "...but there were plenty of people who despised El Jefe, who communicated in less-than-veiled ways their contempt, who *resisted.* But Abelard was simply not one of them...He didn't dream of revolution...wanted only to tend to his wealthy, ailing patients" (226). Although Yunior attempts to characterize Abelard as one who does *not* resist, I argue Abelard's unwavering dedication to his family absolutely constitutes resistance. In any case, Yunior's repeated corrections to his story compromise his credibility as a narrator. For example, he writes: "In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert...pointed out there are no beaches in Jarabacoa," indicating his fallibility (132).

The language recalls the Foucauldian panopticon as the description of the dictator's omnipresence directly correlates to the awareness of the ever-present guard who watches at any moment. And so, when Abelard "Lost nearly twenty pounds during his awful vigil" and he "Nearly killed a patient with a slip of the hand," the effects of this social surveillance have visible ramifications on his physical stature and ability to financially provide for his family (223). This fear of governmental retaliation and knowledge of his constant visibility impacts Abelard's ability to relate to his family, whom he now "Screamed at...almost every day" since his interaction with the dictator. Of particular interest, due to the pressure of surveillance and threat of impending doom, Abelard "Could not get it up much for his mistress" (223). The significance of this impotence becomes increasingly evident when one considers the importance of virility to the male's self-conception of their position as, to borrow Yunior's connotation, a true "Dominican." Latino males are to balance protecting their women with seducing other females – his impotence hinders this (Asencio 109). As noted above, the novel spends considerable time discussing the need for Dominican men to be sexually prolific. Therefore, when Abelard struggles with impotence shortly after an exchange with Trujillo, the very one where he calls Abelard's masculinity into question, one can see how the panoptic environment in conjunction with Trujillo's status as the most "Dominican" male has measurable effects on Abelard. When the explicit invitation for the presence of "Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral *and* wife *and* daughter Jacquelyn" at a Presidential Event arrives, "Abelard nearly [faints]" (228). To make matters worse for Abelard's masculinity, "The daughter Jacquelyn part had been underlined by the party's host. Not once, not twice, but three times" (228). Abelard struggles with the reality of yet another infringement, as he "Alternated between impotent rage and pathetic self-pity" (229). While "impotence" can refer to how powerless Abelard feels, the previous acknowledgment of his decreased ability to perform sexually invokes Abelard's battle with the sense of his own masculinity. In fact, while venting, Abelard remarks, "It's sheer madness! Sheer madness! I'm the father of my

household! I'm the one who says what goes!" (229). The outpouring of frustration and need to verbally clarify his position as male and head of household are evidenced by the control he attempts to reassert through crying out that he alone dictates what happens in the life of his daughter. However, as before, Abelard's virility suffers directly, demonstrated through the fact that he eventually "stopped seeing Lydia," his mistress, after Trujillo's request for the family's attendance (231). Where Lydia was once Abelard's "number-one lover," he can no longer perform sexually (220). Unfortunately for him, Trujillo's position as the "Number-one Bellaco" overcomes Abelard's past history as a man with the ability to obtain and sexually satisfy his women. Undoubtedly, Abelard internalizes the threat of action by the hegemonic masculine figure Trujillo and the knowledge of the likelihood of social surveillance by friends and neighbors. Abelard's experiences with Trujillo set the stage for generations to come; Trujillo's influence as a figure "so fundamentally Dominican" establishes him as the quasi-father and originator of the *machismo* that characters later come to expect of one another.

OSCAR'S MASCULINITY

"You have the same eyes as your abuelo,"[21] Oscar's grandmother tells him; with the novel's structure of including flashbacks to the Cabral family past, Díaz emphasizes the importance of family history (20). And so, when Oscar arrives on the scene generations after his grandfather, his life mirrors Abelard's beyond their shared physical trait. Whereas Abelard cripples under the pressure of a society where "His Eye was everywhere," for Oscar, Dominican society progresses to an obsession with discovering and discussing how closely each male aligns with hegemonic notions of masculinity. From the outset, Yunior describes Oscar as "un-Dominican" (11). He qualifies this assertion expounding that Oscar,

[21] Yunior specifies that this grandfather "ended his days in prison," which we know Abelard does.

> Had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks. (19-20)

He further describes him as one who "simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies" (15), which reasserts the importance of violence and aggression to performance of *machismo*. However, for a brief period in his life, at age seven, Oscar exhibits signs of typical Latino masculinity - to the great pleasure of his family members. He was "one of those preschool loverboys who was always trying to kiss the girls, always coming up behind them during a merengue and giving them the pelvic pump" and "in those days he was (still) a 'normal' Dominican boy, raised in a 'typical' Dominican family" (11). As he was only seven at this time, "dating" two girls, kissing them each behind the bushes, and mimicking the dancing styles of those around him reflects the values of older, "normal" Dominican males in the novel. His "nascent pimp-liness was encouraged by blood and friends alike" (11) as they comment, "Look at that little macho...Que hombre" (14). Here, "macho" means "man" and "Que hombre" translates to "what a man." The emphasis placed on his abundance of masculinity stemming from his early engagement with women, thereby signifies the inculcation of cultural norms at a young age. By seven, Oscar is well-aware of his visibility, and tries to please his audience, being the "first nigger to learn the perrito and the one who danced it any chance he got;" "perrito" typically danced with a style of merengue wherein when executed, the female dances and makes grinding motions while the male "[gives] them the pelvic pump" nearby (11).[22] Oscar's desire to learn and perform the erotic dance "any chance he got" signals his early internalization of Dominican sexuality and hegemonic masculinity. However, this soon changes as after losing both his girlfriends and subsequently crying about it, when another child laughs saying, "Look at the

[22] Refers to the song "El Baile del Perrito" by Wilfrido Vargas.

mariconcito" (16). Similar to Abelard, onlookers call Oscar's masculinity into question, even using versions of the same term, "un maricon" with its diminutive, "mariconcito" followed by laughter at his expense.[23] And just like his grandfather who becomes impotent, shortly after this encounter where somebody deems him a "mariconcito," Oscar falls further from the masculine standard. In fact, he becomes a version of impotent himself as, "He forgot the perrito, forgot the pride he felt when the women in the family had called him hombre. Did not kiss another girl for a long *long* time," (17) just as Abelard "could not get it up much for his mistress" (223) and "stopped seeing [her]" altogether (231). The parallels between grandfather and grandchild underscore the importance of family history. Surveillance, what once only *affects* Abelard's masculinity, transitions into an outright surveillance *of* and repeated comment *on* his grandson's masculinity.

OSCAR UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Given the narrator's prominent role in the story, it comes as no surprise that scholars often position him as the dominant masculine figure; and Yunior wastes no time before trying to convince readers of his own ability to adhere to hegemonic masculinity. He notes the difference between himself and Oscar, even in their childhood saying, 'Back when the rest of us were learning to play wallball and pitch quarters and drive our older brothers' cars and sneak dead soldiers from under parents' eyes, he was gorging himself on a steady stream of Lovecraft, Wells…" (21). Using language that reflects an "us vs. him" mentality, Yunior positions Oscar as an outsider. Well aware of his own internalization and self-surveillance, Yunior adds, "Perhaps if like me he'd been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn't. Couldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to" (21).[24] The narrator compares Oscar to himself, to both demonstrate

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[23] Recall that Abelard is also subjected to laughter during this moment for him as well.

[24] Hegemonic masculinity describes an ideal, Yunior demonstrates that upon close examination, no one performs *machismo* perfectly. His demonstrated knowledge of nerd culture and comics helps expose his own small departures from *machismo*. However, this does not deter him from faulting Oscar for his inability to adhere more closely to normative conceptions. Yunior's awareness that he

how far from "Normal" Oscar stands and to position himself as the standard. Yunior demonstrates his self-perception when he "decided that [he] was going to fix Oscar's life" (175). He says to Oscar, "I'll change your life" (175). By believing himself qualified to "Share some of [his] playerly wisdom," Yunior thus acknowledges his traditional masculinity (173).

Even without considering Yunior, who monitors Oscar both as a narrator and character in the story, Oscar never escapes the constant observation of his masculinity by his sister, uncle, friends, and even strangers; "Everybody noticed his lack of game" Yunior writes, "and because they were Dominican everybody talked about it" (24). The narrator catalogues a number of "prison guards" in Oscar's life. Tío Rudolfo as we know, "was especially generous in his tutelage" (24), advising Oscar to find and sleep with the first ugly girl he can, even giving him a box of condoms and adding, "Use them all...On girls" (49). Oscar's friends Al and Miggs remind him that visually, he remains far from ideal, "Dude, you're kinda way fat, you know" they say (24). Even Oscar's sister Lola, especially concerned with his sexual status, "warned repeatedly, you're going to die a virgin unless you start *changing*" (25). Oscar, who has already demonstrated an awareness of the social expectations, notes it once more responding, "Don't you think I know that? Another five years of this and I'll be you somebody tries to name a church after me" (25). But Lola insists he adjust to exhibit the visible, outward signs of *machismo*. She urges: "Cut the hair, lose the glasses, exercise. And get rid of those porn magazines...they'll never get you a date" (25). Yunior comments as narrator on the "Sound counsel" Lola gives Oscar - demonstrating that everyone agrees about the right course of action for Oscar. Even acquaintances and strangers deny Oscar's masculinity and his "Dominicanness." When Oscar reminds Lola's friends to watch their conversation because "there's a male unit" in the room, one responds, "Where?..I don't see one," denying his ability to identify to

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passes as one closely aligned with hegemonic masculine ideals positions him as the embodiment of the cultural phenomena in Oscar's life.

others as a man (27). Indeed, even at Rutgers where he attends college, "The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican" (49). And by this, they invoke the understanding of "Dominican" so firmly established, helping readers understand why people refuse to accept Oscar as one of them. And so, Oscar and Abelard's circumstances parallel in that both have other characters - Yunior and Trujillo respectively - who represent hegemonic masculinity, and both grandfather and grandchild struggle to live up to its ideals. Moreover, they each live within social structures that force them into constant visibility; where for Abelard Secret Police, Trujillo, and watchful neighbors pervade society, Oscar likewise experiences social surveillance of his masculinity specifically from those near and far to him.

OSCAR'S SELF-SURVEILLANCE AND INTERNALIZATION

Oscar self-surveils and internalizes, attempting at several turns to adjust himself to better fit his Dominican and Dominican-American communities. After being encouraged by his sister to correct his appearance through hair-style changes and weight loss to better suit Dominican ideals, Oscar "tried a couple of times to exercise, leg lifts, sit-ups, walks around the block" but struggles with consistency (25). When his friends Al and Miggs both find girlfriends and subtly refuse to introduce Oscar to anyone, he realizes his "fucked-up comic-book-reading, role-playing-game-loving, no-sports-playing friends were embarrassed by *him*" (29). He becomes aware that other males, who are ostensibly as far removed from the ideal as he, are embarrassed by him. Following this, Oscar again attempts to self-surveil as seen when he "got up, undressed in the bathroom...and examined himself in the mirror. The fat! The miles of stretch marks! The tumescent horribleness of his proportions!" (29). As Yunior informs us early on, the "most damning" deviation from the norm is "no looks" (20), and so when Oscar ponders the next morning saying, "Am I ugly?" (30), he demonstrates his internalization of the importance of outward physicality. This self-surveillance lasts some time, as he "Spent a week looking at himself in the mirror, turning every which way, taking

stock" (30). By viewing himself in the mirror and becoming the object of his own gaze, Oscar illustrates self-surveillance quite literally, where he actually examines himself and desires to adjust what he sees. In an attempt to elevate his looks, Oscar visits to the barbershop. Therein, he:

> ...lost the mustache...then the glasses, bought contacts with the money he was making at the lumberyard and tried to polish up what remained of his Dominicanness, tried to be more like his cursing swaggering cousins, if only because he had started to suspect that in their Latin hypermaleness there might be an answer. (30)

Oscar's preoccupation with modifying himself to "polish up what remained of his Dominicanness," conveys his understanding that he believes it the best course of action to appear more Dominican, that "there might be an answer" in aligning oneself with *machismo* or "Latin hypermalesness." To use the language of Foucault, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power...he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202). In other words, Oscar demonstrates that even without any particular presence forcing him to comply, he has transitioned into taking it upon himself to achieve observable steps towards becoming a "better" Dominican – "he becomes the principle of his own subjection." Ever-visible since childhood, Oscar's actions throughout his life - from dancing the perrito to purchasing contacts - convey his internalization of the principles associated with Dominican culture and masculinity. In fact, in no uncertain terms, he wrestles aloud with Yunior over the ideas he has been fed, saying, "I have heard from a reliable source that no Dominican male has ever died a virgin," the warnings of his sister echoing in his head. Then, he acknowledges Yunior's position as a hegemonic masculine figure and adds, "you who have experience in these matters—do you think this is true?" (174). The social surveillance leads to internalization, and manifests as a literal self-surveillance and questioning of his own adherence to Latino notions of masculinity.

OSCAR'S RESISTANCE

Yet while Oscar attempts to comply with the tenets of Dominican hegemonic masculinity, when positioned directly against purveyors of its ideals, Oscar resists what *machismo* demands. Here, we recall Abelard who initially hopes to appear a faithful supporter of the Trujillo regime but ultimately resists when directly confronted with Trujillo's masculinity in competition with his own. Oscar likewise encounters with hegemonic masculine figures in the novel, where he initially tries to appear compliant, but by the novel's close, Oscar transitions to outright challenging of the figures who embody it. This progression occurs via three distinct moments, with three different men - Manny, Yunior, and finally Capitán. Manny is the ex-boyfriend of a girl, Ana Obregón, who Oscar meets and for whom he quickly develops romantic feelings. When Manny returns from the army, "His sudden appearance, and Ana's joy over it, shattered the hopes Oscar had cultivated" (41). To make matters worse, Ana reveals, "I'd forgotten how big Manny's cock was" (42). With such heavy emphasis placed on male virility, the mention of Manny's well-endowed reproductive organ signals his alignment to *machismo*. Yunior confirms this belief, noting,

> He was this intense emaciated guy with marathon-runner limbs and voracious eyes; when they shook hands Oscar was sure the nigger was going to smack him, he acted so surly...Manny smacked [Ana], Manny kicked her, Manny called her a fat twat, Manny cheated on her, she was sure, with this Cuban chickie from middle school. (43-44)

His appearance, violence, and abuse of women coincide with both of Asencio's findings regarding *machismo*, and his sleeping around suggests the sexual rapacity stressed throughout the story. Importantly, Oscar's mild response to meeting Manny constitutes the first of three stages in his approach to hegemonic masculine figures. Here, Oscar speaks to Manny "in a voice so full of cheerful innocuousness that he could have shot himself for it" (43). In this case, Oscar chooses to mask the frustration behind his fantasies of letting Ana "find Manny hanging from a light fixture in

his apartment, his tongue a swollen purple bladder in his mouth, his pants around his ankles" (43). Although his daydreams suggest the desire to emasculate Manny by stealing Ana, killing him, and informing her that Manny "was too weak for this Hard New World," (43) Oscar instead passively chooses to smile and hope "somehow an earthquake would demolish all of Paterson" (44). "Passivity" thus summarizes the first stage of Oscar's progression to outright resistance.

The second phase in his development occurs during an encounter with Yunior, a well-documented proponent of Dominican hegemonic masculinity. As mentioned, Yunior attempts to fix Oscar by working out and sharing his "playerly" wisdom with him. Initially willing to run despite his "huffing down George Street, those ashy black knees of his a-shaking," Oscar soon attempts to thwart Yunior's efforts to exercise with him (177). First passively, Oscar "Started getting up at five so when [Yunior] got up he'd already be at his computer, could claim he was in the middle of this amazingly important chapter" (177). Eventually, Oscar decides to quit, after "actually [getting] down on his knees" and begging Yunior to stop (177). When Yunior gets upset with Oscar for quitting, he "dropped the ultimatum. You either run or that's it" (179). Frustrated, Oscar, with his voice rising, exclaims, "I don't want to do it anymore!" but Yunior insists, and "put [his] hands on him" yelling "Get up!" (179). Unlike his encounter with Manny, Oscar chooses to progress beyond passivity to measurably asserting himself. He responds, "You leave me alone!" and shoves Yunior – enacting the some of the violence he only imagines for Manny. Challenging Yunior more directly, evidenced by physical and verbal steps, Oscar enters new territory for his resistance to hegemonic masculinity. By transitioning into a form of violence and unswerving speech, Oscar inaugurates the second stage of resistance.

Oscar's encounter with the capitán, permanently concludes his resistance to *machismo*. The capitán, is the boyfriend of Ybón Pimentel, the aging prostitute who lives two houses over from his grandmother in the Dominican Republic. Oscar "considered her the start of his *real* life" (279).

Farther than he previously gets with other women, Oscar goes to her house daily, learning details of her past such as "the two abortions she'd had...the time she'd been jailed in Madrid" and "She told him about her Dominican boyfriend, the capitán" (287). Ybón soon "started mentioning her boyfriend...a lot more. Seems he'd heard about Oscar and wanted to meet him" (291). Unfortunately, while receiving "his first kiss ever" (293) from Ybón, "who was standing behind them, looking in on the scene inside the car with an expression of sheer murder? Why, the capitán of course" (294). Like Manny and Yunior, the capitán immediately signals *machismo*. Yunior describes him as, "One of those tall, arrogant, acerbically handsome niggers that most of the planet feels inferior to" and interestingly, he notes "He'd been young during the Trujillato" (294). Once more, Oscar encounters a male whose alignment with Dominican hegemonic masculinity clashes with his own departure from it. Capitán's henchmen take Oscar to a canefield where he receives "the beating to end all beatings...a beatdown so cruel and relentless" (298). Despite a "Broken nose, shattered zygomatic arch, crushed seventh cranial nerve, three of his teeth snapped off at the gum, [and a] concussion," Oscar survives (301). For weeks, Oscar oscillates between fear and cursing the Capitán and his henchmen. He "Dreamed again and again of the cane...except now it wasn't him at the receiving end of the beating, but his sister, his mother, heard them shrieking, begging for them to stop, please God *stop*, but instead of racing toward the voices, he *ran away*!" (306). And while his dreams initially suggest a regression from his previous steps toward resistance, he transitions to active resistance.

> Six weeks after the Colossal Beatdown he dreamed about the cane again. But instead of bolting when the cries began, when the bones started breaking, he summoned all the courage he ever had, would ever have, and forced himself to do the one thing he did not want to do, that he could not bear to do.
>
> He listened. (307)

Oscar determines to return to the Dominican Republic, and "On Saturday he was gone" (313). Upon arriving and seeing Ybón, despite her urgings for him to leave, he declares "I'm not going anywhere" (316). Just as he refuses to exercise with Yunior and he determines to listen to the screams in his dream, Oscar decides to face the threat of violent repercussions for his presence. "For twenty-seven days he...Sat in front of her house" and went to where she worked to try to see her (317). Yet still an object of constant surveillance, "The neighbors, when they saw him on the curb, shook their heads and said, Look at that loco" (317). Echoing the language from the first pages of the novel, "Look at that little macho," when he had girlfriends, "Look at the mariconcito," when he cried after losing them, and finally "Look at that loco," as he fights to reclaim one, Díaz again reminds readers of Oscar's visibility. Inevitably, the Capitán learns of Oscar's return, but "This time Oscar didn't cry when they drove him back to the canefields" (320), no longer the tearful "mariconcito," or the passive, innocuously smiling boy, Oscar embraces his chosen path and faces his impending death as "He tried to stand bravely" (321).

> The words coming out like they belonged to someone else, his Spanish good for once. He told them what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world....He told them about Ybón and the way he loved her...told them if they killed him they would probably feel nothing either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he'd be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream...you can be. (321-322)

In contrast to the person who once had both his masculinity and Dominican identity repeatedly questioned, Oscar asserts himself in the face of the henchmen, who are doubly representative of the Capitán and thus, hegemonic masculinity. In other words, their association with Capitán locates them in a Latino masculinity genealogy --Trujillo-Capitán-Henchmen--and underscores the

pervasive nature of *machismo* the novel suggests. However, he chooses neither to back down or to resort to violence. Instead, he describes the wondrous experience he always hoped for: Love. And so, Oscar's life and final act of resistance culminate not in attempting to harmonize with *machismo*, but in choosing to embrace his dissonance with the cultural system of Dominican hegemonic masculinity.

CONCLUSIONS

Adding to his originally stated goal of "screwing with traditional Dominican masculinity," Díaz explains, "This novel (I cannot say it enough) is all about the dangers of dictatorship - Trujillo is just the face I use to push these ideas" (O'Rourke). Indeed, Abelard wrestles with living under a governmental dictatorship - one whose cultural influences transcend history to affect even Oscar generations later. More than simply a political kind, this novel also wrestles with conceptual, cultural dictatorships, where the currently accepted, dominant ideals of Dominican hegemonic masculinity exercise absolute control over the way men and women behave towards one another. Both Abelard and Oscar attempt to contest *machismo*. However, by the novel's close, both die as a result of the power that hegemonic masculine figures exert over them. Although they each resist, their similarly tragic endings, I argue, communicate the futility of their resistance. To clarify, I posit that the Cabral family story illustrates how resistance to the cultural system of hegemonic masculinity (both Dominican and otherwise), at least at the level of *individuals*, is futile. To explain the need for *collective*, rather than *individual* efforts, I return once more to Connell. She elaborates on hegemony, saying, "The concept...deriving from Antonio Gramsci's analysis of class relations, refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life" (77). Important to note, in the novel a "group" of people, rather than respective individuals, push understandings of Dominican masculinity. Like in the Foucauldian panopticon, anyone can enter the prison and assume the position of the guard. So, while particular characters may embody *machismo*, the

community participates in its proliferation - as seen through the vigilant neighbors in the Trujillato and the slew of people who comment on Oscar's masculinity. In perhaps more relatable terms, for concepts like "locker-room talk" to permeate and resonate within the culture, more than just the visible bearers of power have to reinforce the idea.[25] And so, the onus lies with the people to encourage, as Michael Kimmel, leading expert in men and masculinities, phrases it, "a gender politics of inclusion" (333).[26] That is to say, rather than allowing panoptic systems of power to inculcate singular ideologies of masculinity and gender practice, communities must collectively work to be inclusive of people and however way they choose to perform their masculinity.

How, then, do we respond to and change these dominating perceptions of manhood, especially if the novel suggests the futility of efforts by lone individuals? Kimmel begs, "It is my hope that such changes not rehearse the failed strategies that have dogged our efforts to prove our manhood but that we accept the responsibility to consider other possibilities, other visions of manhood" (333). The answer then, he contends, is not to necessarily establish better qualities of manhood to encourage, but to find "A definition that centers around standing up for justice and equality," one that "means a gender politics of inclusion" which Kimmel calls, "Democratic manhood" (333). Rather than subscribing to any one normative notion of masculinity, the community should work to accept all individual manifestations. Kimmel closes, saying:

> The battle to prove manhood is a battle that can never be won. Only by renouncing the battle itself—not in resigned retreat, but by joining the struggles of others for their rightful

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[25] During the October 2016 Republican debate, then Presidential nominee, Donald Trump explained his lewd comments about grabbing women saying, "This was locker-room talk." Understandably, there was push back on the idea that frequent conversation about sexual harassment and assault occurs in locker rooms. See Works Cited for *Time, CNN, Washington Post* and *New York Times* articles discussing the comment and resulting backlash.

[26] While Kimmel's text, *Manhood in America*, discusses American men and their ideals, its principles transcend culture.

> share of the sun—only then can we...men come home from our wars, heal our wounds, and breath a collective sigh of relief. (335)

The chapter "The Final Letter" complicates whether in his last words, Oscar truly "renounces the battle" with Dominican hegemonic masculinity. A package arrives to Yunior revealing that Oscar indeed sleeps with Ybón. However, "what really got him was not the bam-bam-bam of sex—it was the little intimacies that he'd never in his whole life anticipated" (Díaz 334). Perhaps Oscar's preference for "the little intimacies" as opposed to the "bam-bam-bam of sex" positions him as moving beyond the desire to simply lose his virginity and towards establishing a personal, rather than societal set of values for himself. But given Oscar's silenced voice, the novel concludes on an ambivalent note concerning this possibility. Despite this indeterminacy, and perhaps because of it, ultimately, I contend, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* forces conversations about how we treat one another, the impossibility of the standards upon which we grade members of our communities, and the trickle-down effect of limited gender ideologies. Rather than attempting to advocate for one, very limited kind of human, we should be "joining the struggles of others for their rightful share of the sun," resisting singularity and only then can we all "breath a collective sigh of relief" for generations to come.

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